

Grammar Notebooks as Learning Tools

By W. Browder Swetnam

In a typical English grammar classroom anywhere in the world, students commonly have three things in front of them on the first day of class: a pencil, a textbook, and a notebook. Much literature has been written about textbook materials but very little about that other standard piece of equipment, the notebook.

More than just papers with some words written on them, notebooks can be powerful tools in assisting students during their learning process. First, notebooks are useful in organizing what a teachers says and writes on the board, so that later the students can understand the information. Second, notebooks are used to record recognizable feedback of previously learned material from class assignments. Third, notebooks are used to write additional practice done outside of class. Fourth, notebooks can provide valuable documentation for teachers of the students' progress in order to give grades and as a measure of the effectiveness of the teachers' instructions. More often than not, when our students study for tests, they consult their notebooks as well as their texts.

Notebooks can also serve as communication tools between students and teachers. Teachers can use the notebooks to write notes to the students concerning their progress. Or the teacher may have a special page in the notebook for "Questions to the Teacher."

All of these factors make the notebook a very useful tool for students studying at home.

Grammar Notebook Criteria

As with any graded aspect of a student's work, teachers should inform students what they expect from them in their notebooks. Students' notebooks should be graded according to the following criteria at least:

1. Organization

Is the notebook well organized? Can the teacher readily identify homework, notes, and class assignments?

2. Neatness

Is the student's writing legible? Are all the pages attached or are pages falling out?

3. Completeness

Are all homework assignments in the notebook? Are notes that were written on the board present in the notebook?

I typically have students turn in their notebooks each time there is a test. In this way, I can see the progress they have made in keeping their notebooks and can compare this to their

performances on the tests. This gives accountability to the notes, class assignments, and homework.

So that students do not mix notes and assignments from other classes, I insist that students keep a special notebook just for grammar. This makes the task of identifying homework, notes, and class assignments much easier for the teacher. Also, by having a special notebook for grammar, students cannot be distracted by their notes and assignments from other classes while they are studying their English grammar notebooks at home.

Teachers should insist that all homework be written in complete sentences in the grammar notebook. This is so that students can practice writing complete sentences using the grammar concept that is being taught instead of just filling in the blanks.

Checking Homework

The day the homework assignment is due, teachers should check the notebooks at the beginning of class. This provides students with prompt feedback on their homework and, at the same time, makes for a quick review of the previous day's lesson.

Rather than checking each students' answers in their grammar notebooks, I ask each student to show me his/her homework. If the homework done corresponds to the assignment given and it is complete, I write the number on the page of the assignment that corresponds to the number of that assignment. For example, if the assignment I am checking is the sixth homework assignment given since the course started, I write the number 6 on the page. In this way I can quickly confirm the student's assignment, and I can readily identify it later when I grade the grammar notebook.

I then select students to go to the board to write their answers to the homework assignment. After I correct the homework on the board, I direct students to check their homework in the grammar notebook against that on the board. I do this because it teaches the students that how they apply what they have learned is valuable. In other words, it validates any of their outside work related to the class.

The Grammar Notebook as a Diagnostic Tool

In addition to being a learning tool for students, the grammar notebook can also assist teachers in assessing each student's progress. First, it can show the teacher the degree to which the student participates and pays attention in class. Teachers can readily see if a student has copied the notes that the teacher has written on the board and has done homework and class assignments. For example, sketches and doodles may indicate a student's lack of interest and off-task time.

Second, teachers can see exactly which grammatical concepts give students the most trouble and which mistakes are most commonly made. Teachers can then present those concepts more carefully the next time they are taught, or teachers can choose to reteach them to the students.

Finally, student completion or lack of completion of homework and class work can indicate the students' understanding of the concept as well as their participation in class. Class assignments

which are only partially completed may indicate frustration or lack of interest in class, just as incomplete homework can indicate the same feelings for the subject outside of class.

Conclusion

The principal purpose for using notebooks is to assist students in their understanding of those concepts being taught, to organize the concepts together so that they relate to one another, and to encourage students to study at home. The end result is an improvement in students' grades and an increase in students' progress. This makes students more successful in English classrooms.

W. Browder Swetnam is an ESL instructor at Elmira College, Pennsylvania, USA.